

# TRANSITIONS IN FORM: THE PRE-SERIF LETTER

The following is a very brief summary of both the text and images from Sumner Stone's article in the 2007 issue of *The EJF Journal* (No. 11). For more information about becoming a colleague of the Edward Johnston Foundation and receiving the *Journal* see <http://www.ejf.org.uk/abouttheedwardjo.html>.

Since the sixth century BCE, there have been several major transitions in the form of the Roman letter. It is well known that the Romans borrowed their writing system from the Etruscans. The forms were monoline and they endured for 500 years of Roman "pre-serif" writing. After that they were replaced by seriffed, shaded letters.

Since 1800 the monoline letter which we now call sans serif has made a remarkable comeback, reminding us that we have long ignored an important aspect of our letterform history. Relegated to obscurity for almost 2000 years, the sans has once again become a major player on the typographic stage.

Accounts of the Roman script frequently begin with the Trajan Inscription, cut in Rome, 113 CE.<sup>1</sup> The style of the Imperial Roman letter represents a radical departure from the one which preceded it, notably by the presence of serifs and by a modulation of the stroke between thick and thin. The forms are remarkably subtle and sophisticated compared to the earlier monoline letter. It serves as a model for capital letters today.

Serifs first appear on Greek inscriptions from colonies on the eastern Adriatic coast in the late fourth century BCE, and in Latin inscriptions from Greece beginning in the second half of the second century BCE.<sup>2</sup> There are seriffed forms on the *Pons Fabricius* in Rome, constructed in 62 BCE. Clearly dated extant examples of seriffed forms with thick and thin parts do not appear until the second half of the first century BCE. The first appearance of the full-blown Imperial letter seems to have occurred during the reign of Augustus.

The reasons for the Roman letter reform remain obscure as does any inkling about the actual process by which the new letterforms were derived or who was responsible for inventing them. It is very unlikely that the magnificent Imperial Roman letters were the work of a Roman. By the first century BCE scribes were generally slaves.

In the late second and early first centuries BCE the pre-serif Latin letters begin to look remarkably similar to twenty-first century sans

serif letterforms. The early 19th century revival of the sans serif letter was certainly a move toward simplicity. It entered through the portal of advertising typography alongside the Fat Faces and their ilk. In the twentieth century Edward Johnston's "Essential Forms", Jan van Krimpen's Romulus sans serif, and Johnston and Gill's sans serif types establish links between seriffed and sans serif forms. The integrative "humanistic" sans serifs have received a good deal of attention in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

In many cultures, scribal systems for teaching and making letterforms set the stage for changes in the forms of written characters. The pressure for internal visual consistency which results from such a system has played a strong role in the design of our own letters. At the same time, it is also true that the personality and character of individual scribes provide the "genetic" diversity from which the next generation of letter forms will be taken. To understand how letterforms change, it is necessary to understand, in each case, the status and function of writing in its society and time. The great shifts in letterform seem to follow political and religious changes as Morison explained in detail. Regularly occurring incremental changes must also be understood in the context of the surrounding culture.

There is a great deal left to be understood in the details which accompany letterform change. The motive and modus operandi behind the Roman pre-serif to serif transition are still mysteries.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Catich, *The Origin of the Serif*, Saint Ambrose College, 1968, 1991. Catich presents his theory that the use of the brush is the most important factor in the development of the serif. His analysis of craft practice during the golden age of the seriffed/shaded Roman letter is of particular interest.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Morison's *Politics and Script* (Oxford, 1972, 2000). *Politics* contains pictures of both early Greek and Roman seriffed and monoline forms. Morison suggests that the first seriffed forms may have been imitating the cuneiform wedge.

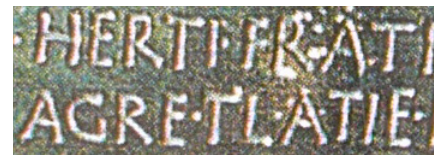
<sup>3</sup> Edward Johnston, *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering*, 1906. For information and a look at Romulus Sans see Walter Tracy, *Letters of Credit*, Godine, 1986.



Here we see the letters straight from the hand of the writer. Rim fragment from a black gloss krater. Votive. Ardea, Sanctuary dedicated to Venus. Late 4th century BCE. Epigraphy Museum, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome. The catalogue for the Museum contains a large collection of Roman monoline material.



Smaller fragments of a decree of Priene honouring Lysimachos inscribed on the anta of the temple of Athena Polias at Priene above a letter from the king (I.Priene 15). The lettering of the inscription is an example of a formal early third-century script. Squeeze. <http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/CSAD/Images/300/Image336.html>. Date: ca. 285 BCE.



Iguvium tablet V, side B. Municipal Museum, Gubbio, Umbria, Italy. From *The Tables of Iguvium*, Edizioni Jama Perugia, 1997. First century BCE. Bronze.



Augustan inscription in the Roman Forum. 9 CE. Photo by the author.

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